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# Autobiography, Patriarchy, and Motherlessness in Frankenstein

## **Keywords**

Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, Women Studies

**Autobiography, Patriarchy, and Motherlessness in  
*Frankenstein***

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The characters who populate Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* indicate the autobiographical nature of the book, particularly in its stance on the motherless daughter. In a story that reflects Shelley's own experience, daughters are always motherless, like the monster around which the action revolves. The motherless daughters in the story, much like Shelley herself, are left open to the scorn, rejection, and dehumanization which a culture raised by and for fathers heaps upon them. Thus, by his circumvention of the mother and the further undermining of the humanity of his motherless creature, Victor Frankenstein is portrayed as the patriarch who creates but cannot love and who fears sexual reproduction.

Shelley's own motherless, vulnerable life and her fear of motherhood come through in her book, where almost every character is a fictionalization of someone she knew. For example, her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, often wrote under the pseudonym of Victor, the name of her story's protagonist. Percy had a sister named Elizabeth, with whom he shared a "passionately loving attachment," while Victor Frankenstein and his cousin/sister Elizabeth have a barely unincestuous relationship in the book (Hill-Miller 61). More importantly to my purposes, however, is that Shelley's mother, the great feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, who authored *The Rights of Women*, a bleak look at the prospects of motherhood in England's patriarchal society, died only eleven days after giving birth to her own daughter. Wollstonecraft's death created in Mary Shelley a lifelong guilt and a vision of motherhood as a fatal endeavor. Her father, the philosopher William Godwin, was also a famous author. Along with her husband he is reflected in the character of Victor Frankenstein, who creates a motherless creature but abandons it as soon as it comes to life. Similarly,

Godwin abandoned his daughter when she made an autonomous decision and eloped with Percy Shelley. During her period of estrangement from her father, Shelley gave birth to two children, both of whom died afterward. The deaths of her children furthered Shelley's interpretation of motherhood as a thing to be feared—to her mind, motherhood could not succeed either for its children or its mothers. Thus, in her 1831 introduction of the book, Shelley called it her "hideous progeny," her creation in the place of a child (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 912).

This terror of motherhood, and its implications to its unfortunate products, is shown frighteningly in *Frankenstein*, where *every* daughter is without a mother and is frequently also the cause of her mother's death. Victor's cousin Elizabeth's mother dies early on; she is adopted by the Frankenstein family and becomes a sister to Victor. She transmits scarlet fever to her adopted mother, whose death Victor calls an "irreparable evil," and from which he never seems to fully recover (927). Justine, a favorite servant of the Frankensteins, becomes a permanent part of the family when *her*

mother dies, and she becomes "like a most affectionate mother" (951) to the youngest child, Edward. Even the minor characters of the Arabian girl Safie and the young girl Agatha with whom she lives are motherless.

All these daughters without mothers become victims of abandonment by patriarchal figures and to the inevitable death that surrounds females who involve themselves with mothering. Elizabeth's father simply decides, upon remarriage, that he does not want her anymore. She finds a home with the Frankensteins, but her marriage to Victor and potential motherhood of his children prove fatal. Justine is executed for the murder of the boy to whom she was a foster mother. Safie's father uses her beauty to secure escape from prison with help from Felix and then refuses to let her marry him.

Seeing that all the other motherless characters in the book who are subject to death and patriarchal rejection are daughter and that Shelley herself was abandoned by her father, Frankenstein's creation may be read as an extension of this theme, and even as

Shelley herself. Although he is male, his character has much more in common with the story's daughters than with its fathers and sons.

To cement this reading of the monster as Shelley and a daughter, one must look again at the relationship between Victor's rejection of his creation and William Godwin's abandonment of Mary Shelley. Both Victor and Godwin delighted in their motherless creations until the moment of realization that these daughter figures were capable of autonomy. Shelley's decision to use her reproductive powers outside of wedlock reminded her father that she was not merely a creation over which he could wield power, much as the animation of Victor's creation makes him realize that the monster can and will have powers of its own.

Given this feminine reading of the creature, his experiences are illustrations of every daughter's vulnerable existence without a mother. He is chased from human society, denied a parental relationship, and generally dehumanized by the patriarchy which gave him birth. Just as Victor dotes on the motherless Elizabeth,

not as a friend or loved one but as a “favorite animal” or a “summer insect,” the creature is dehumanized in all his interactions with mankind (923). The unnaturalness of the monster’s creation is reflected in his frightful appearance and further capitalized upon by an unfeeling patriarchal culture, represented first by his creator Victor. At his animation, Victor recoils from him and refers to him as an “animal,” just as he did Elizabeth (946).

As the creature comes to a more human understanding, he teaches himself language and compassion while watching the DeLacey family and hopes to become a part of humanity despite his maker’s abandonment. He realizes that his motherless state and his father’s rejection leave him vulnerable to becoming less than human: “(N)o mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses. . . . *What was I?*” (973 emphasis added.) Later the creature recalls his loneliness with no parent to soothe him, asking, “Where was [my creator]? “(H)e had abandoned me, and, in the bitterness of my heart, I cursed him” (979). This last comment seals the creature’s fate. He begins a downward spiral of bowing



to the hatred of humanity, responding by becoming the very monster they want him to be. When the DeLacey family leaves him in fear, he roams the forest, howling “like a wild beast,” and decides to wage “everlasting war against the [human] species” that created and then rejected him (982).

Victor Frankenstein’s place in the cycle of motherlessness and its subsequent dehumanization becomes very clear in his treatment of the creature. He first creates him with the full intention of making the mother’s role in creation obsolete but then, predictably, rejects him as an unnatural monster. His act of creation is dehumanizing, he replaces the mother’s role in procreation with science, and then calls his creation an inhuman monster for the very unnaturalness he bestowed upon it. His actions perpetuate the system that kills its mothers and dehumanizes its daughters, thus forcing his creation into becoming the monstrosity he fears.

Victor’s attitude toward natural procreation is one of fear and disgust, making creation without the act of sex appealing. His revulsion may stem from his family’s tendency toward incestuous

relationships and its extremely patriarchal history—his father married the daughter of one of his closest friends after having taken her in as a daughter. When he married, he did so out of a sense of obligation to “bestow[...] upon the state sons” (921). Thus, in Victor’s birth there was a hint of incest and an entirely paternal desire to create sons, void of romance or regard for the mother, who was reduced to a mere carrier. When Victor gets older, he is betrothed to Elizabeth, the first cousin who has been a sister to him throughout his childhood. On her deathbed, Victor’s mother calls them both “my children” (927) and then immediately begs the ‘siblings’ to marry. After this first implication of incest, she goes on to ask Elizabeth to “supply [her] place”(927) to the children, thus making Elizabeth a cousin, sister, and even mother to Victor.

Given these incestuous implications and his father’s unromantic marriage, Victor’s distaste for sex is unsurprising. In his descriptions of Elizabeth, his “affection” is repeatedly stated, but nowhere is there a hint of passion or romantic interest. For example, Victor says that he loves his “brothers,

Elizabeth, and Clerval,” (928), putting his feelings for Elizabeth in the same vein as fraternal love for his brothers and friendly (albeit borderline homosexual) love for Henry Clerval, his best friend. In fact, throughout the novel, his sentiments regarding Clerval are decidedly more romantic-sounding than his feelings for Elizabeth. He describes Clerval as “beloved” and “divinely wrought” (994) shortly after assuring his father that he loves Elizabeth “tenderly and sincerely” with “admiration and affection” (991).

Regardless of whether his real romantic interests lie in Clerval, however, Victor seems to redirect his heterosexual desire with the creation of his monster, which he describes in highly sexualized language. In the search for dead tissue, he looks in the “unhallowed damp[s]” of the earth, and with “unrelaxed and breathless eagerness [...] pursue[s] nature to her hidden places.” His construction of the creature he calls his “midnight labors,” which he works at with “unremitting ardor,” “a resistless, and almost frantic impulse,” and “an eagerness which perpetually increase[s]” (933). When at last he arrives at “the consummation of [his] toils,” the animating process is described as orgasmic, both for him and

the creature (932). "With an anxiety that almost amount[s] to agony," Victor watches the creature "breathe hard, and a convulsive motion agitate its limbs" (934). This description is almost that of masturbation; Victor, alone in his secluded tower, works himself into a sexualized frenzy to gratify his creative powers without a woman. When the creature's body convulses, Victor's horror at his actions is apparent: "I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation, but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished" (935).

Once he has created his monster, he realizes the abomination of his product. The "wretch," as he calls it upon its birth, is his creation and his alone. He has no female counterpart with whom he can jointly control it, and the autonomy of his unnatural, motherless creature frightens and dismays him. He runs from it and sleeps away his cares, only to dream a prophetic dream. In his sleep he sees "Elizabeth, in the bloom of health" and takes her into his arms to kiss her. However, at the moment of physical contact, he beholds that

he is in fact kissing "the corpse of [his] dead mother," and upon waking is confronted by the newly animated monster. His dream is a shortened version of the entire story of the book his fear of physical sexuality with his sister/mother (Elizabeth) betrays his fear of incest (shown by an intimate embrace with his mother), which in turn pushes him to create a monster without a mother—thus invalidating the role of the mother, as symbolized by the corpse in his dream.

Victor's aversion to heterosexual sex and his subsequent destruction of motherhood is again brought to light when he tears apart the female creature he was making for his original monster. He toils for months on her creation, but when he realizes that he is effectively providing the creature with a sexual partner with whom he could produce a "race of devils," destroys her (1000).

This scene is important to all the themes being discussed here. Of course, Victor's fear of sex is again stated, but his actions are also paradoxical in regards to his attitude toward patriarchy and motherhood. While he destroys the female creature to keep her from becoming a mother and thus perpetuating the cycle of

motherlessness, he is also strangely putting an end to that very cycle. Were he to imbue her with life, she would be another motherless creature, spurned by society if she chose mankind over her mate. Rather than adding another wretch to the ranks of dehumanized motherless daughters, he chooses not to give her life at all.

This reading may seem a bit of a stretch, but take into consideration that it is only after Victor destroys the female creature, ending the cycle of motherlessness, that he begins to show any real romantic interest in Elizabeth. In his newfound passion for a heterosexual relationship, he seems to be further distancing himself from the motherless cycle he had once championed. When the monster vows that he “will be there on [Victor’s] wedding-night” (again replacing the sex act with his presence), Victor misinterprets his words to mean that he will be murdered, and his only compunction over this idea is that he would leave his “beloved Elizabeth” bereaved (1001). Here is the first incidence of the word “beloved” in signifying Elizabeth instead of

Clerval. After Clerval's death (which might have added some fuel to Victor's passion, with his homosexual love gone—but that is for another essay), Victor finally begins to “love Elizabeth, and look forward” to his union with her (1014). His fear of sex and incest appears to be gone, and his desire to prevent motherhood abandoned.

For all his reforms, Victor is doomed to live out his original dream of a motherless creation story. When the fated night arrives, the monster kills Elizabeth instead of Victor, and by doing so closes the cycle of motherlessness that his birth started. By killing the woman who might have someday borne Victor's natural children, his unnatural, motherless child truly becomes both the monster his father abhorred and the product of a patriarchy that Victor continued. Elizabeth was Victor's only hope of breaking the cycle he had perpetuated, and in her death the smaller cycle of motherlessness, dehumanization, and ultimate patriarchal power that he began with his monster's construction is complete. The monster's murder of Elizabeth perpetuates the trend of daughters

killing their mothers in that Elizabeth could have been his mother if he had been a natural born child.

Thus Shelley brings the reader to her point. Her life lived as a motherless child of a patriarch and her experience as a failed mother left her open to all sorts of fears about motherhood. She felt that she was a spurned creation of a society in which mothers cannot survive due to the repression of their natural reproductive powers and where daughters have no control over their own humanity once they have caused their mothers' deaths. *Frankenstein* is a truly despairing novel about the nature of a society that lets its daughters become monsters rather than esteemed citizens and serves as a warning to those who would try to keep mothers out of creation. Mary Shelley's experience, told through the "dull yellow eye" of the creature, left her with little hope for her future as a mother or for her children's lives after her death.



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